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Establishment Redux: New Jobs for the Old Guard

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By David Ignatius

WHEN JAMES BAKER III was nominated as secretary of state last November, he did something surprisingly old-fashioned. He consulted his predecessors: Dean Rusk, William Rogers, Henry Kissinger, Cyrus Vance, George Shultz. The Wise Men. The foreign-policy Establishment.

Baker's quest for advice was reminiscent of a similar search in 1960. David Halberstam recalls in his book "The Best and the Brightest" how President-elect John Kennedy prepared for office by soliciting advice from the foreign-policy elite, beginning with former secretary of defense Robert Lovett, "the very embodiment of the Establishment." It was a way of tapping into the legacy of George Marshall and Dean Acheson, the world of Groton and Andover and Harvard and Yale. Lovett advised Kennedy to choose an adopted son of the Establishment—Dean Rusk—as his secretary of state.

Baker's decision to reach back into the past for advice—back to Dean Rusk himself—symbolizes what may be the distinguishing characteristic of the Bush presidency: The Establishment—the virtuous but sometimes arrogant elite that gave us the American Century and the Vietnam War, that gave us some of our best and worst moments as a nation—is back in power after nearly 20 years in the post-Vietnam wilderness.

Look at the inauguration podium Friday and here's what you'll see: President George Herbert Walker Bush (Andover and Yale), a man who has devoted most of his adult life to the Establishment ideal of public service; Secretary of State-designate Baker (Hill School and Princeton); Secretary of the Treasury Nicholas Brady (St. Marks and Yale). And in the wings you'll see two trusted equerries—Brent Scowcroft and Lawrence Eagleburger, the designated national security adviser and deputy secretary of state—who prepped at the most elite finishing school of all, Henry Kissinger's National Security Council staff.

Bush's Cabinet, as R.W. Apple wrote in The New York Times last week, is largely a group of "white male governmental professionals or semipros," most of whom play tennis.

The Establishment is back—not just the individuals and the pedigrees, but the state of mind. The new buzzwords in George Bush's Washington are "public service," "bipartisan foreign policy," "partnership with Congress." Behind these phrases lies an important change in philosophy. In Bush's Washington, government is no longer regarded as the enemy. It is seen again, as it was 25 years ago, as a venue for doing good in the world, for promoting virtue. It seeks a kinder, gentler—and less political—America.

"It was of course above politics," wrote Halberstam of the Establishment of 1961. "It feared the right . . . and it feared the left; it held what was proclaimed to be the center. More often than not it was Republican, though it hedged its bets."

He could have been talking about George Bush's Washington. Who today disagrees with the bipartisan view on foreign policy? Who, indeed, disagrees about anything in Washington these days? Consensus is back in fashion. The era of confrontation is over. The government-haters are gone; the government-lovers are back in charge. Close your eyes Friday and you may feel, for a moment, as if you have fallen back into a time before Vietnam.

What a change from the populist ethos that brought Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter to office! The country in those days was fed up with the gentlemen who celebrated public service and gave the country the Vietnam War. People were angry not just at the McNamaras and Rusks, but at the Bushes and Bakers and Kissingers. Indeed, according to political analyst William Schneider, populist resentment of the do-gooder elite was the most consistent theme in American politics during the past 20 years. The public (not without reason) resented the hell out of the Establishment and its moral presumption to leadership.

Reagan-the-populist delivered a last blast at Washington in his farewell speech last Wednesday night: " 'We the people' are the driver; the government is the car. And we decide where it should go and by what route and how fast . . . . But back in the 1960s when I began, it seemed to me that we had begun reversing

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the order of things, that through more and more rules and regulations and confiscatory taxes, the government was taking more of our money, more of our options, and more of our freedom. I went into politics in part to put up my hand and say, 'Stop!' "

You cannot imagine George Bush saying that, not even in his most desperate, Roger Ailes-scripted bid for votes. Nobody would believe him. He is, after all, a product of government service himself, a man who rose to the top largely through a series of appointive offices. The authentic voice of George Bush is the one we heard during a 1987 Republican debate in Houston: "I'm not antigovernment. When I was at the CIA, I ran into some of the finest, most public-spirited people I've ever served with.... Don't blame those that make a lifetime of service to the government. Give them the kind of leadership they need, and they'll follow and get the job done."

So the Establishment—the people who celebrate government and its service—is back. But the years in exile—the years of public hostility and private self-doubt—have left their mark. The group's membership and attitudes have changed. And so have the club rules.

Vietnam nearly destroyed the old elite, especially the patrician Democrats who were directly involved in the war. James Schlesinger, former secretary of defense, explained in an interview several years ago: "[Vietnam] shattered the self-confidence of the elite and created clear divisions among them. In order for an American foreign-policy elite to function as the governing class does in Europe, it must have a high degree of consensus. That was destroyed."

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser, recalled several years ago: "When I was growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one met with these people. One had a sense of a group with a genuine sense of purpose. Not agonizing all the time. Not torn. They had a sense of purpose translated into action, and that is leadership. That was no longer true in the 1970s and 1980s. They were self-searching, agonizing, apologizing, always blaming America first."

The Reagan years, paradoxically, helped rebuild the confidence and consensus of the foreign-policy elite that Reagan had despised. The post-Vietnam traumas about American power gradually diminished. Grenada and Libya demonstrated to most observers the appropriate uses of military power; Lebanon showed its limits. For all Reagan's conservative rhetoric, it was the George Shultzs and Jim Bakers who were running the show in Washington. The centrist consensus developed to the point that by 1988, on arms-control and U.S.-Soviet issues, Reagan himself had become something of an Establishmentarian.

As the wounds of Vietnam began to heal, the old pre-Vietnam institutions and personalities again came to the fore. The old elite was celebrated in books like "The Wise Men," by Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, and "Master of the Game," a study of Paul Nitze by Strobe Talbott. Nostalgia also surfaced in documentaries and newspaper articles—not to mention the new taste in men's fashion for suspenders, bow ties and handmade British shoes. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to look like Dean Acheson. And a new generation of young diplomats, journalists, bankers and lawyers began queuing up to join the Council on Foreign Relations.

And yet the new generation of the Establishment is different. It's more diffuse geographically, drawn from across the country rather than just the East Coast. It's more democratic and less dominated by preppy white males. Carla Hills, the new special trade representative, is no less a member than Brent Scowcroft. It's probably less arrogant, too, but give the new Establishmentarians time.

Above all, the new elite is bipartisan. Indeed, it seems almost to have captured that holy grail of "bipartisan foreign policy," the loss of which analysts have regularly bemoaned since the demise of Sen. Arthur Vandenberg. The extremes of left and right that dominated the national debate on foreign policy through the 1970s and early '80s seem almost to have disappeared. Really now: Is there any significant philosophical difference on defense issues between the leading congressional Democrat, Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, and Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci? Or between Nunn and John Tower, who will be Bush's secretary of defense? Opinion on many important topics these days runs the gamut from A to B.

According to Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor who was a campaign adviser to Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, the basic outlines of American foreign policy would be the same if Dukakis had been elected president. "I don't think the differences would be that sharp," says Nye, "and that's an interesting comment on where we've come in the last 15

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years. The sharp wounds to some extent have healed. Bush has a better prospect for bipartisanship than we've seen in a decade and a half."

The new Establishment has its drawbacks. It is still an unelected bastion of power and privilege, and its claims to special expertise sit uneasily with our democratic traditions. It's less interventionist abroad, but also less visionary. It maintains an easy consensus these days, but that may be because it doesn't stand for anything very exciting or controversial.

The big test for the Bush crowd will be their ability to respond creatively to the challenge posed by Mikhail Gorbachev. So far, the signs aren't encouraging. The new foreign-policy elite, for all its cohesion, has tended to let the Soviet leader set the global agenda—rather than offering a bold vision of its own.

That's partly because the new Establishment is wedded to the same myths and institutions as the founder generation of Marshall and Acheson. The touchstone remains NATO and the ideal of collective self-defense that led to its creation. Indeed, many of the outings and activities of the foreign-policy club—the gatherings at Ditchley Park in England, the 50-year anniversary conferences hosted by the German Marshall Fund—seem designed to reassure its members that nothing has really changed since the late 1940s.

This Eurocentrism makes little sense. Asia and the Third World are the problem areas of the 1990s, not Britain and France. But the latter-day Wise Men are still oriented toward Europe—not just in policy terms, but in the languages they learn, the wines they drink, the places they vacation, the literature they prize. No wonder the old Establishment was so unprepared for Vietnam, or that it made the disastrous mistake of applying the NATO model of collective self-defense to an Asian guerrilla war. Europe was all it knew.

Nye summarizes the challenge for the new Establishment this way: "Are we going to adapt to a changing national-security environment in which economic issues will play a much more important role? To do that, we'll have to walk and chew gum at the same time. And that's not something the Establishment has ever done very well."